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(54) **PORTABLE MICROWAVE PLASMA DISCHARGE UNIT**

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(58) **Field of Classification Search** .... 219/121.52, 219/121.36, 121.48, 121.54, 121.43; 204/298.38; 118/723 MW; 315/111.51
See application file for complete search history.

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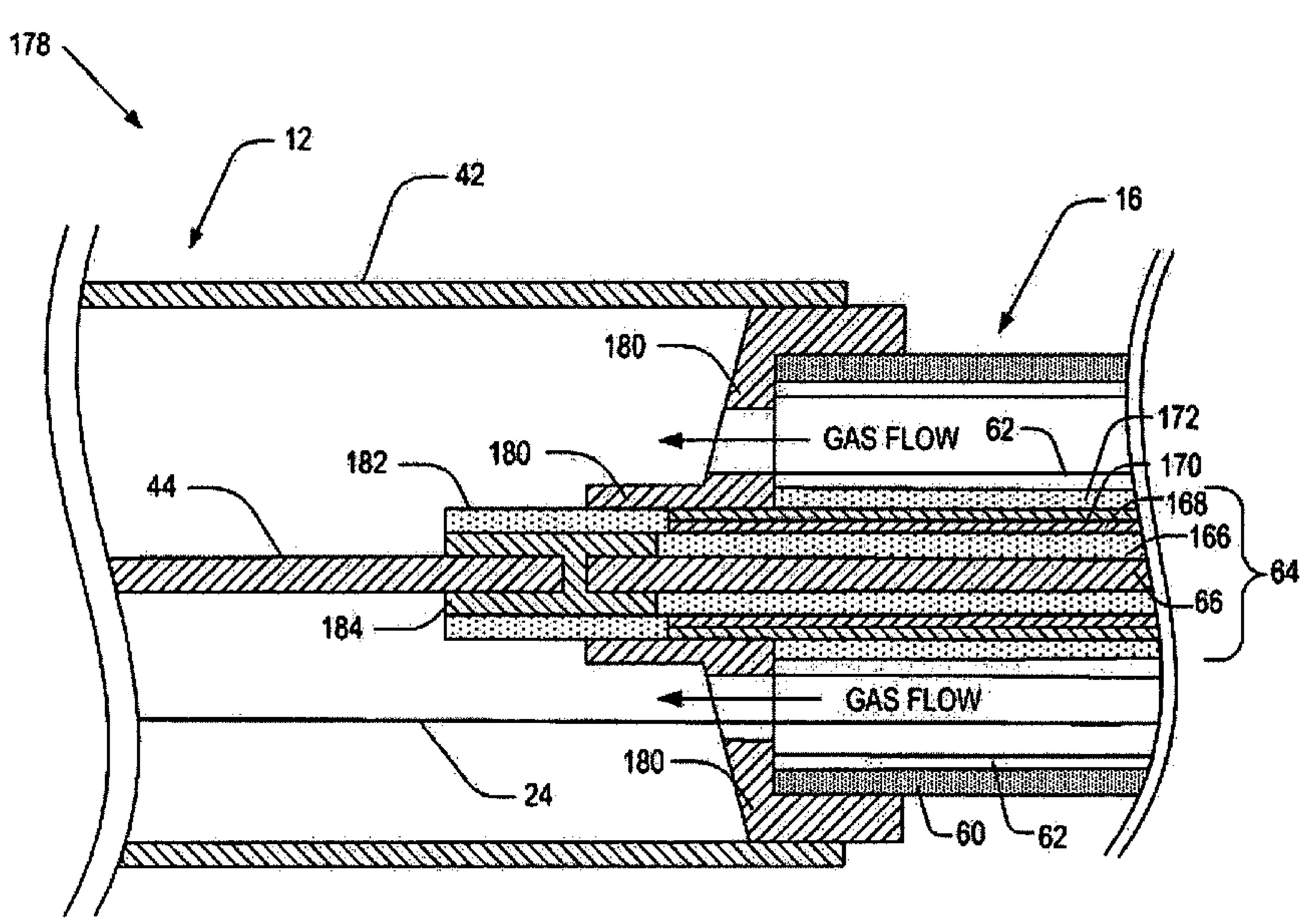
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A portable microwave plasma discharge unit receives microwaves and a gas flow via a supply line. The portable microwave plasma discharge unit generates plasma from the gas flow and the received microwaves. The portable microwave plasma discharge unit includes a gas flow tube made of a conducting and/or dielectric material and a rod-shaped conductor that is axially disposed in the gas flow tube. The rod-shaped conductor has an end configured to contact a microwave supply conductor of the supply line to receive microwaves and a tapered tip positioned adjacent the outlet portion of the gas flow tube. The tapered tip is configured to focus the microwaves received from the microwave supply conductor to generate plasma from the gas flow.

43 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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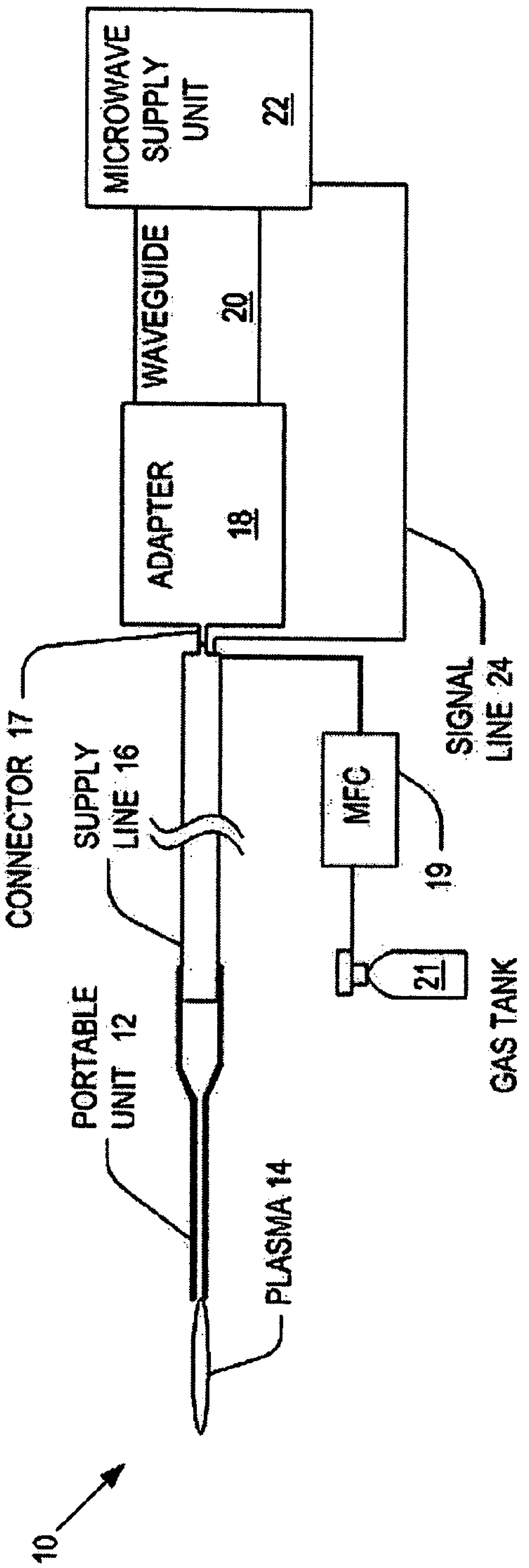
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WAVEGUIDE 20
ADAPTER 18
CONNECTOR 17
SUPPLY LINE 16
PORTABLE UNIT 12
PLASMA 14
MFC
19
21
GAS TANK
SIGNAL LINE 24
10

FIG. 1

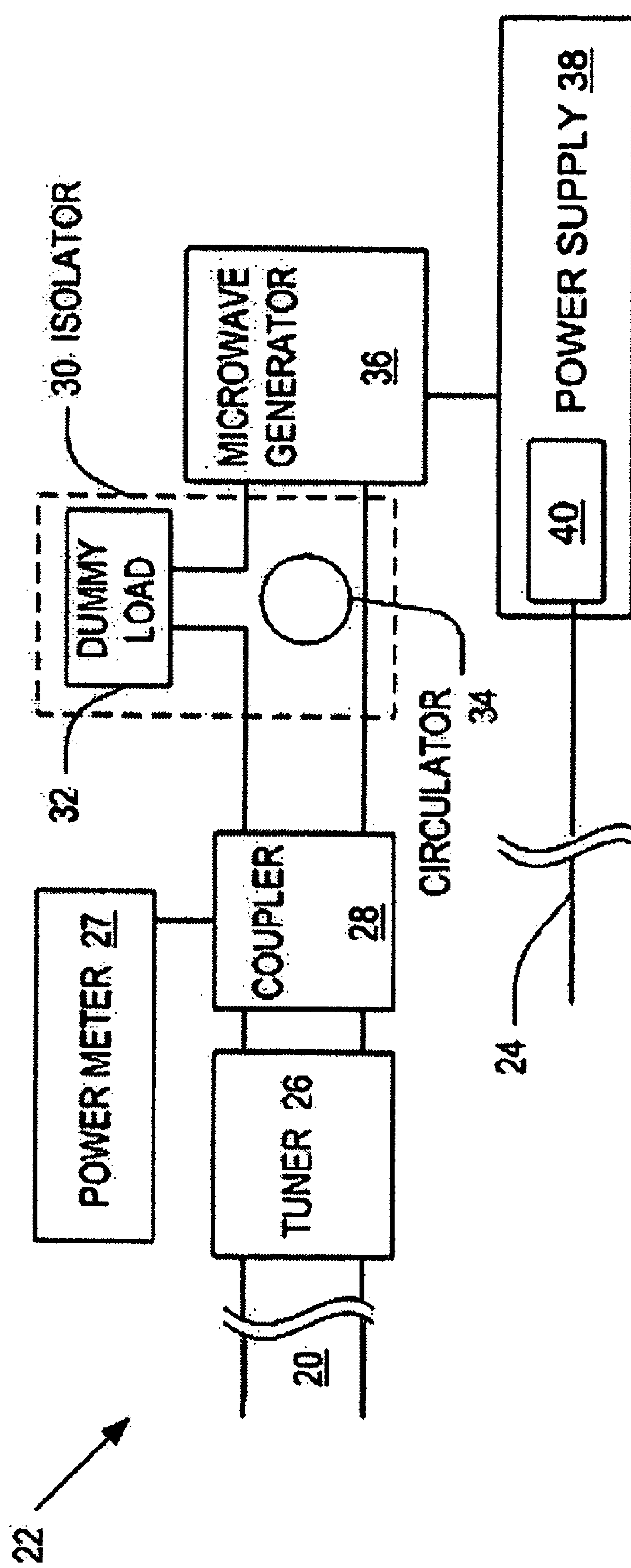
30 ISOLATOR
MICROWAVE GENERATOR 36
POWER SUPPLY 38
40
DUMMY LOAD
32
CIRCULATOR 34
POWER METER 27
COUPLER 28
TUNER 26
20
24
22

FIG. 2

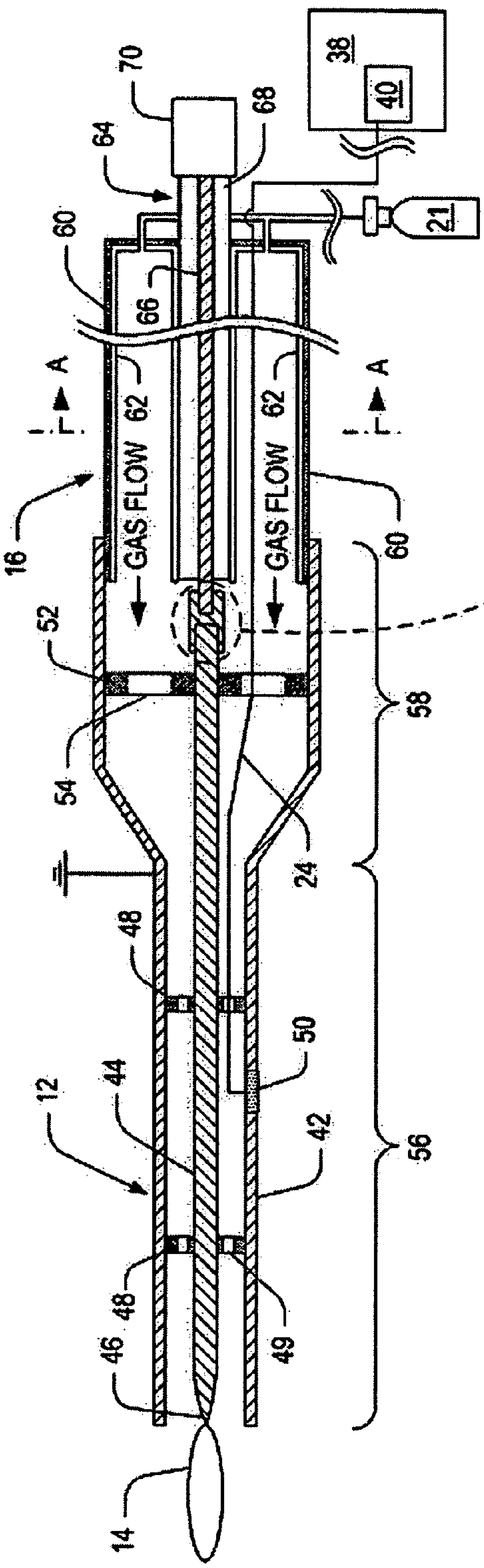

FIG. 3

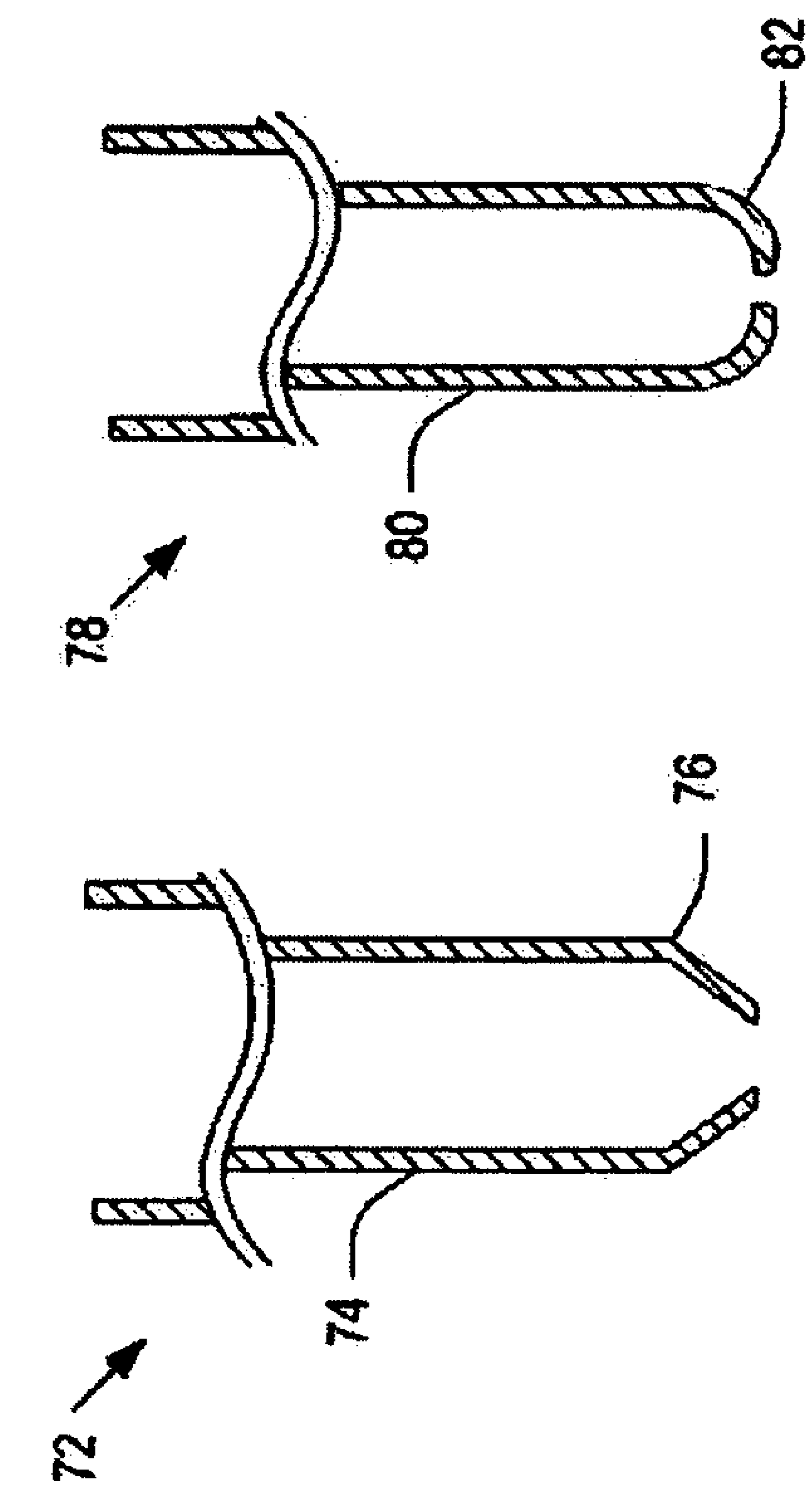

FIG. 4A

FIG. 4B

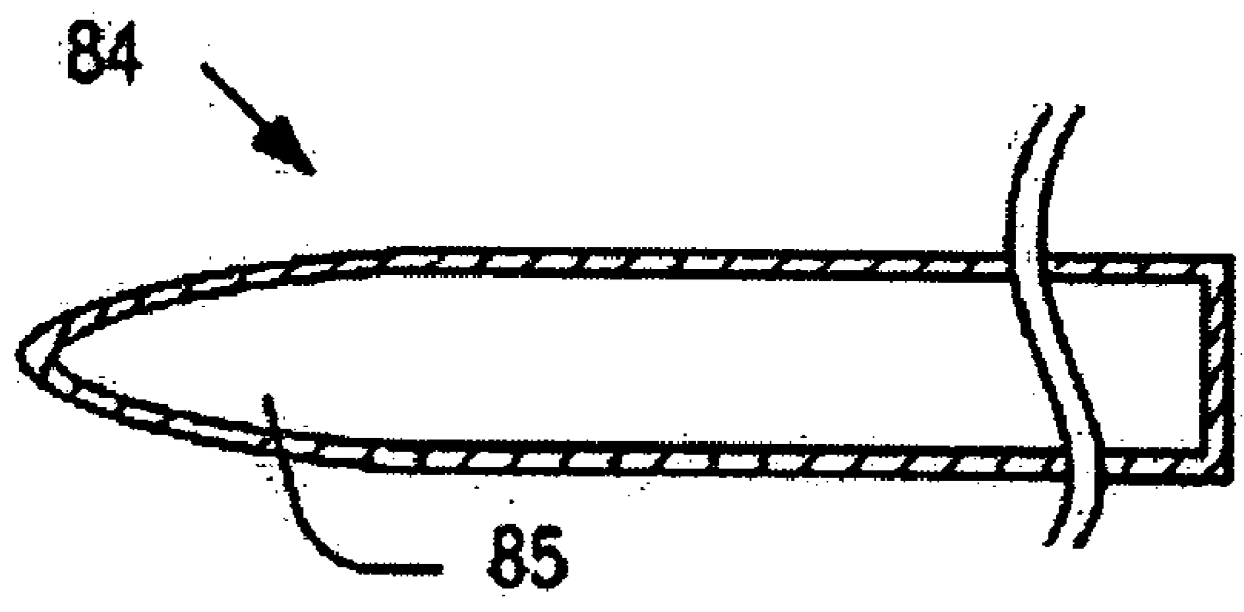

FIG. 5A

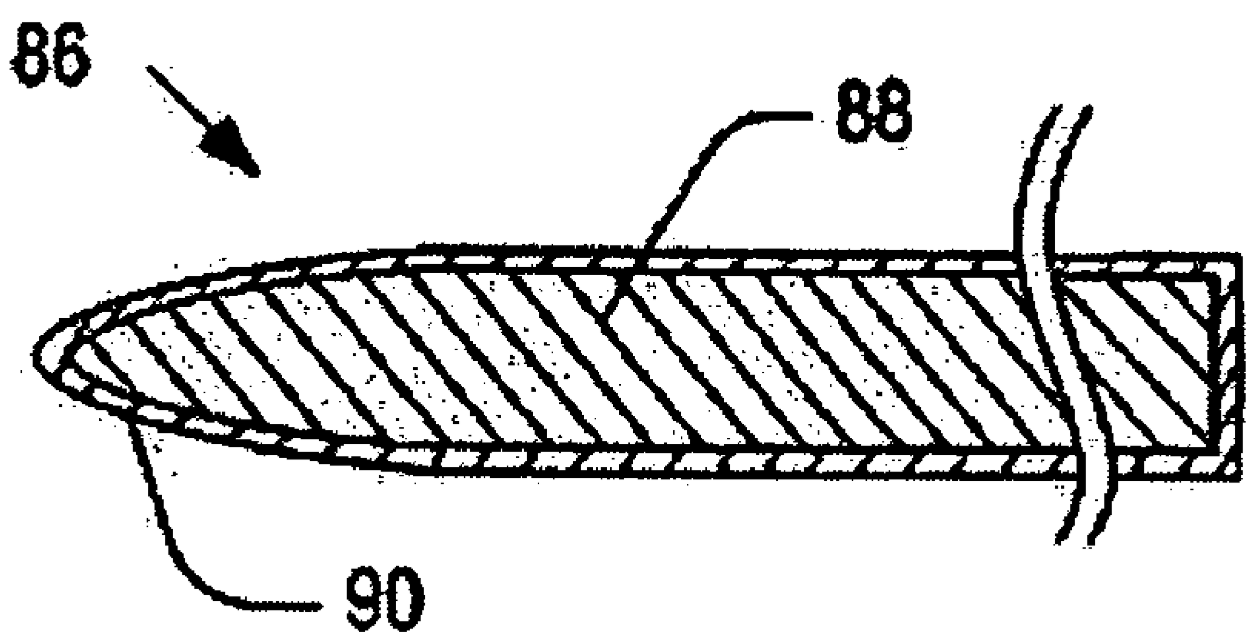

FIG. 5B

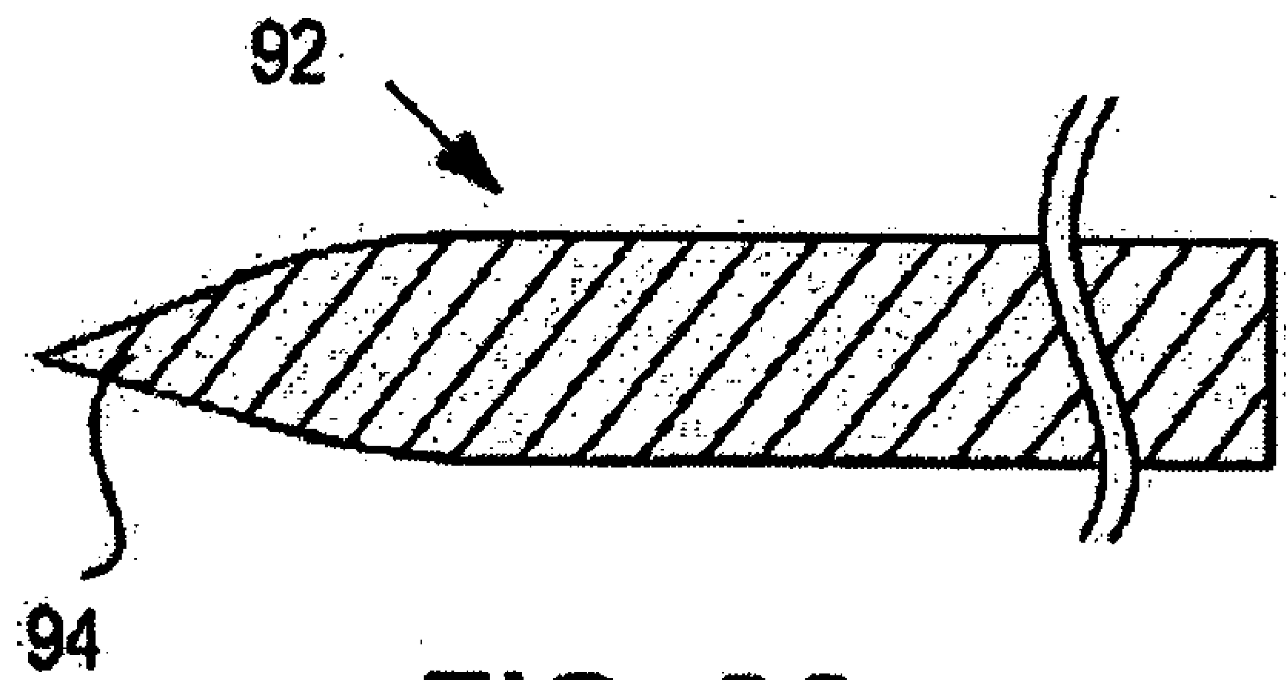

FIG. 5C

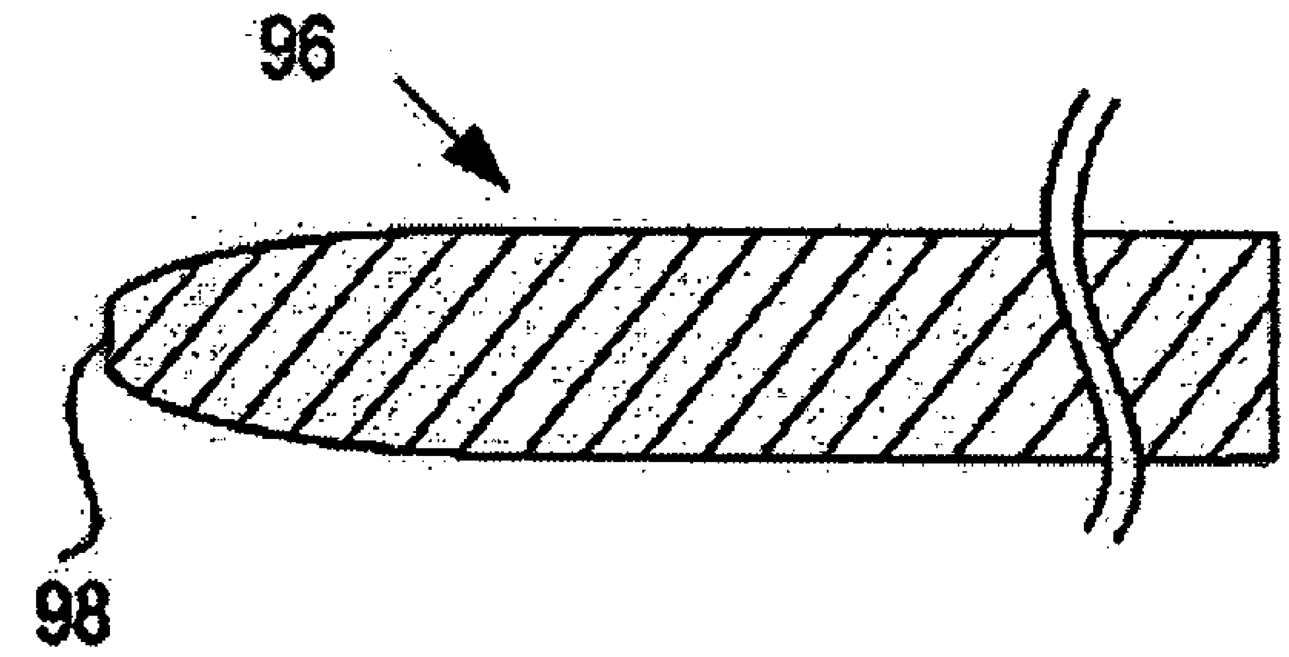

FIG. 5D

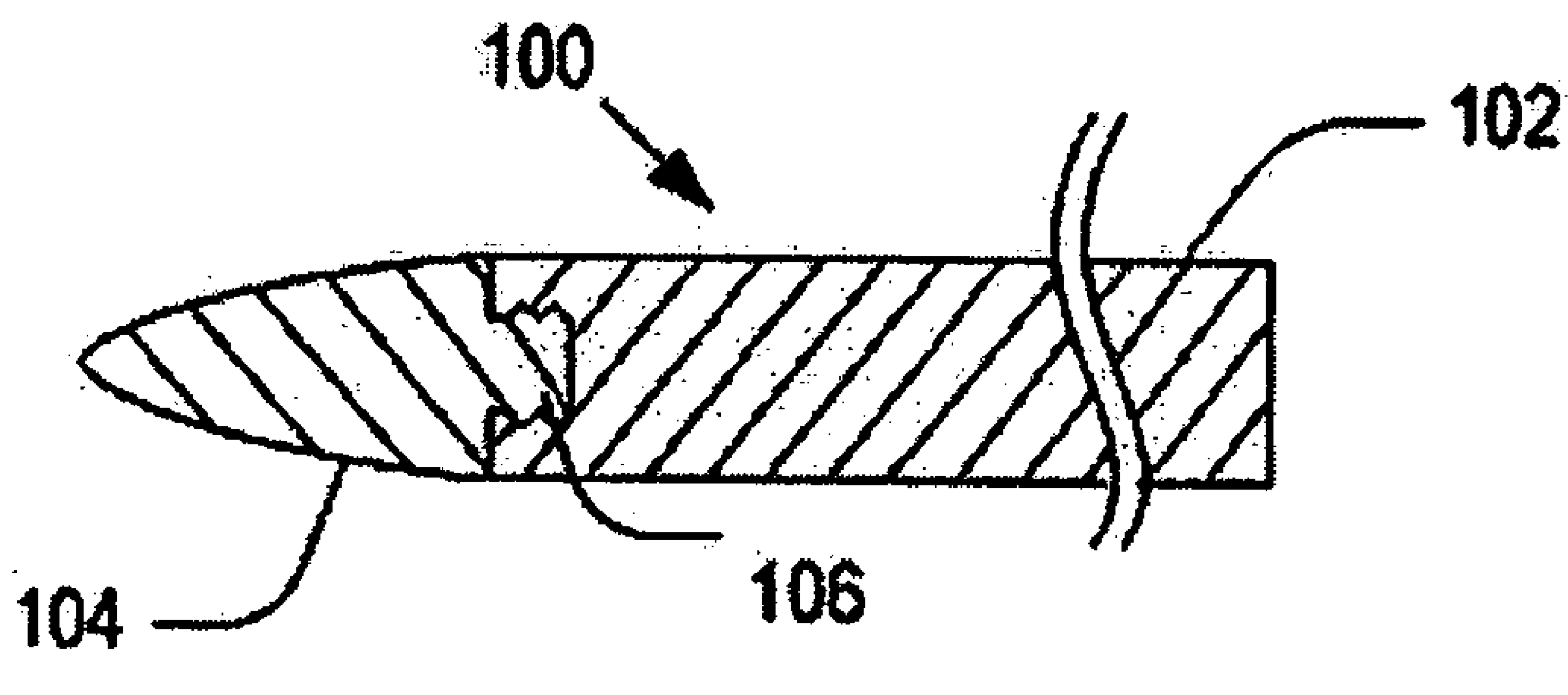

FIG. 5E

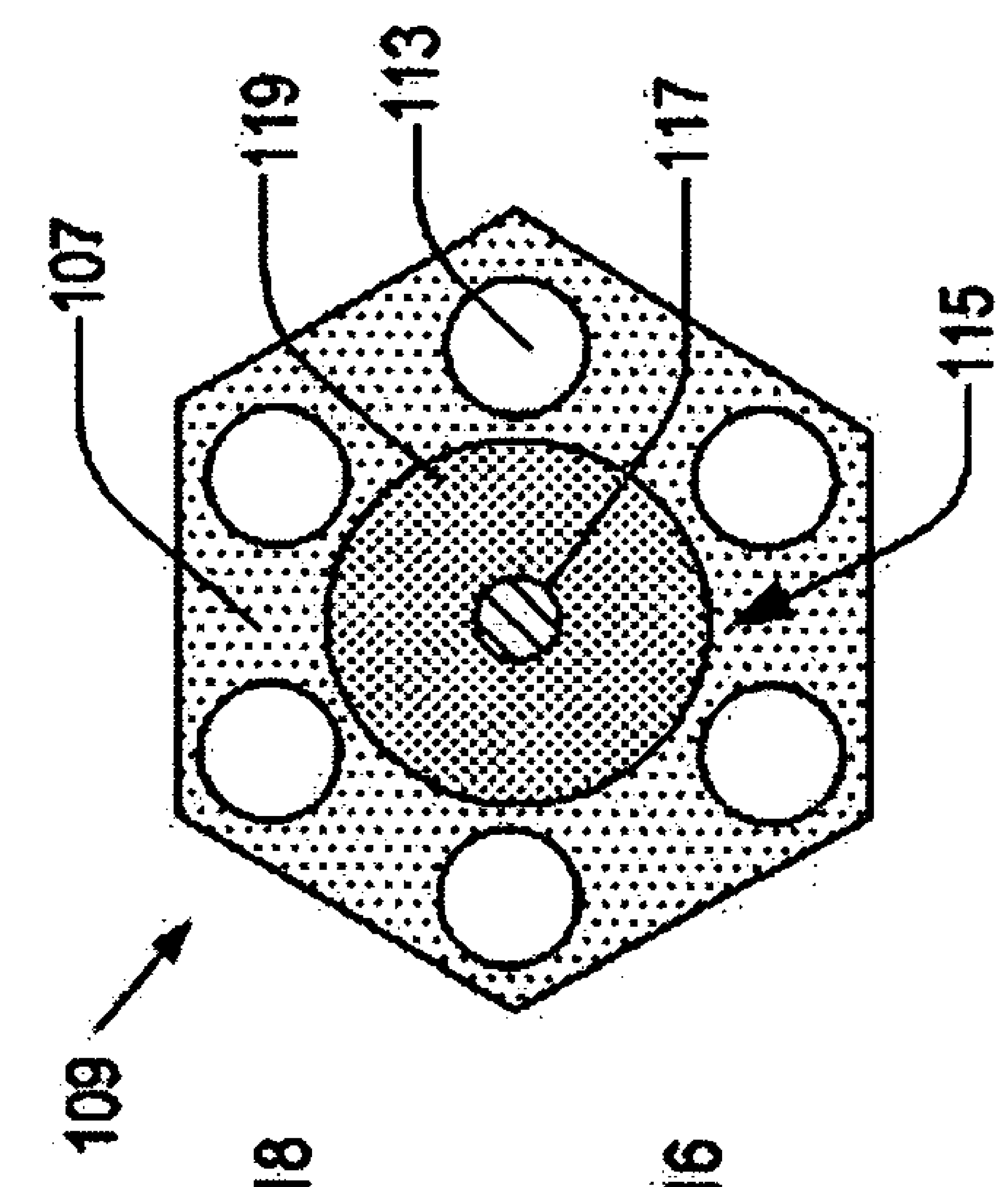

FIG. 6C

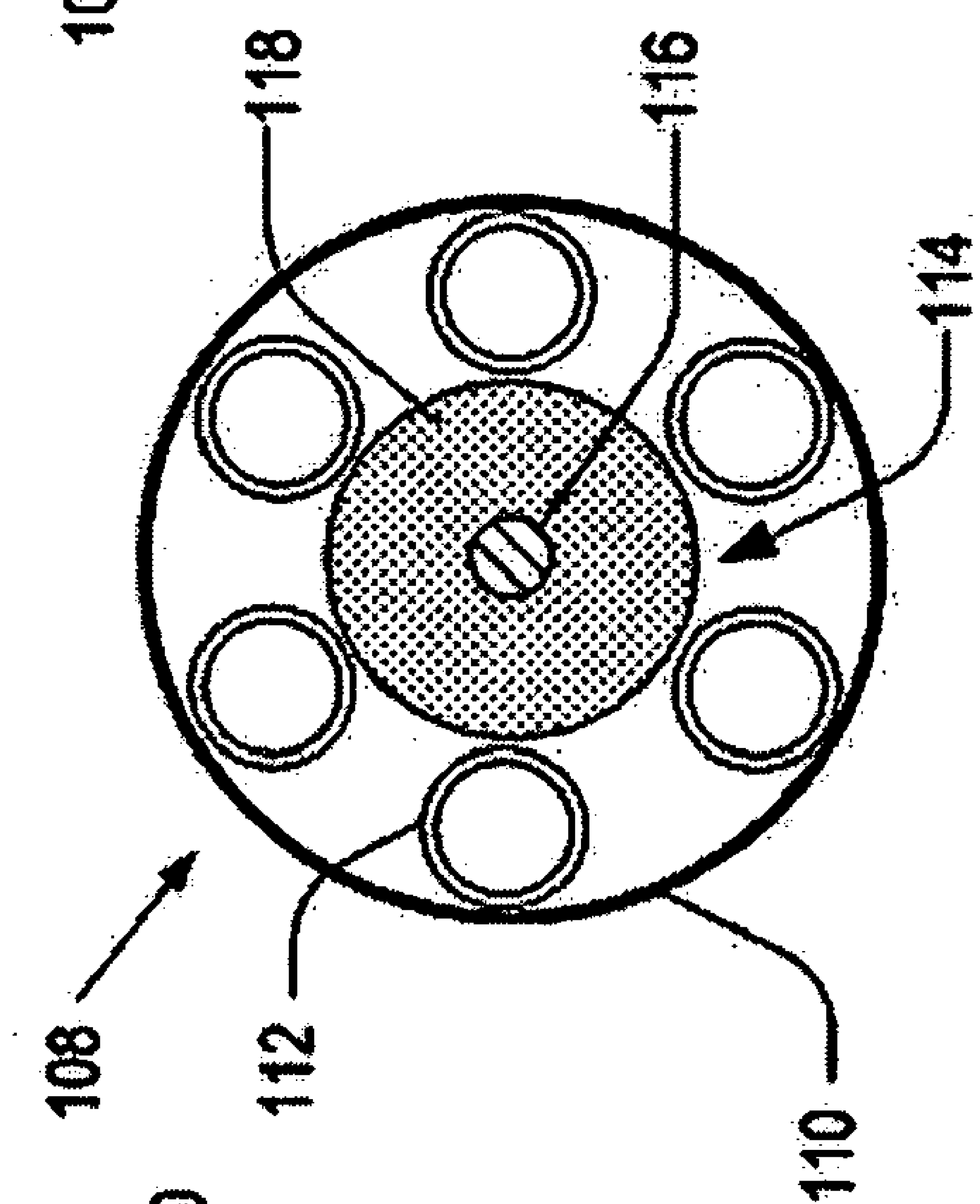

FIG. 6B

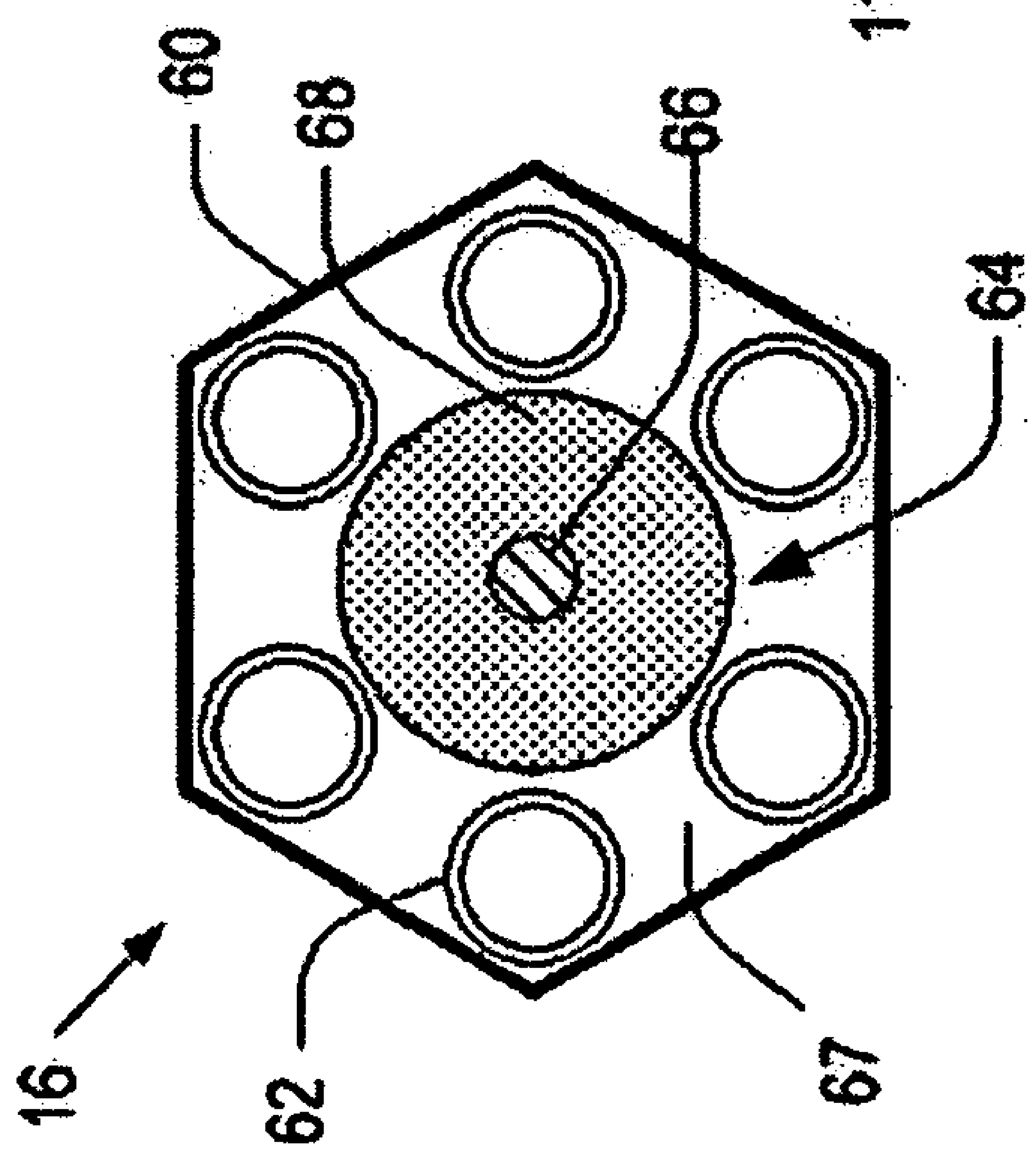

FIG. 6A

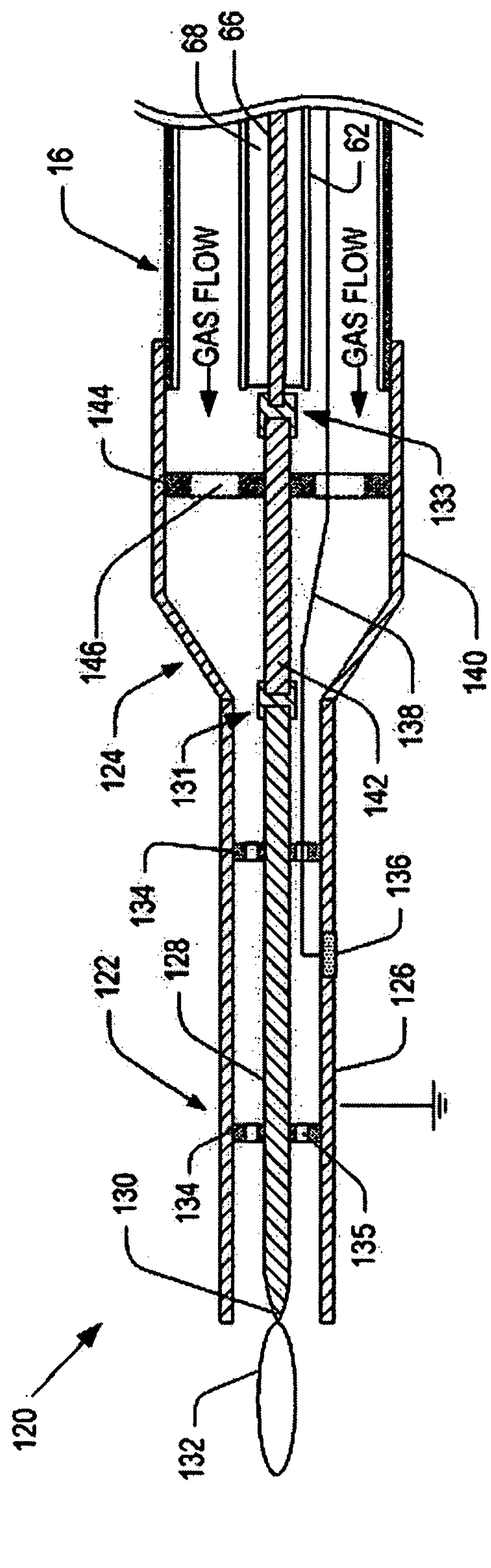

FIG. 7

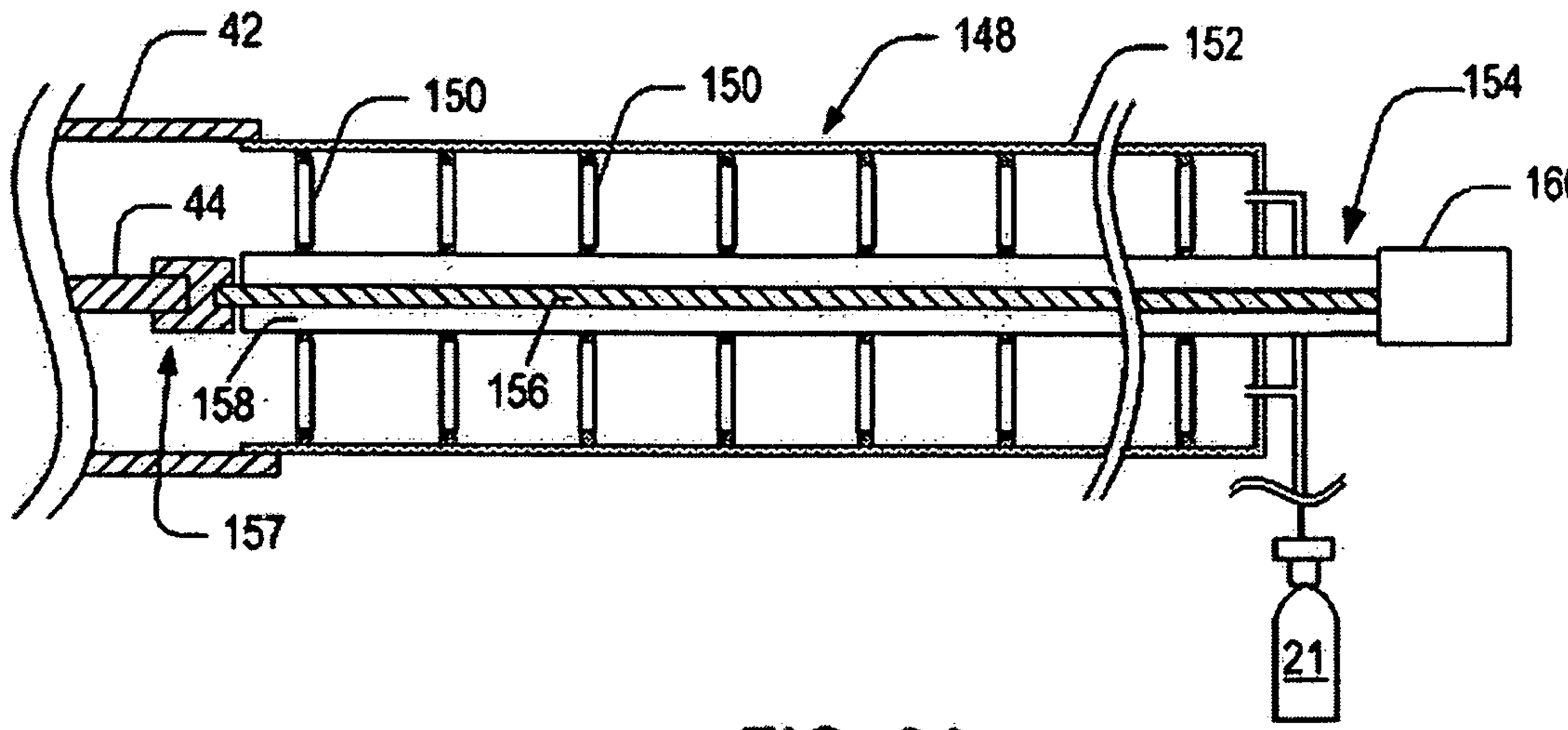

FIG. 8A

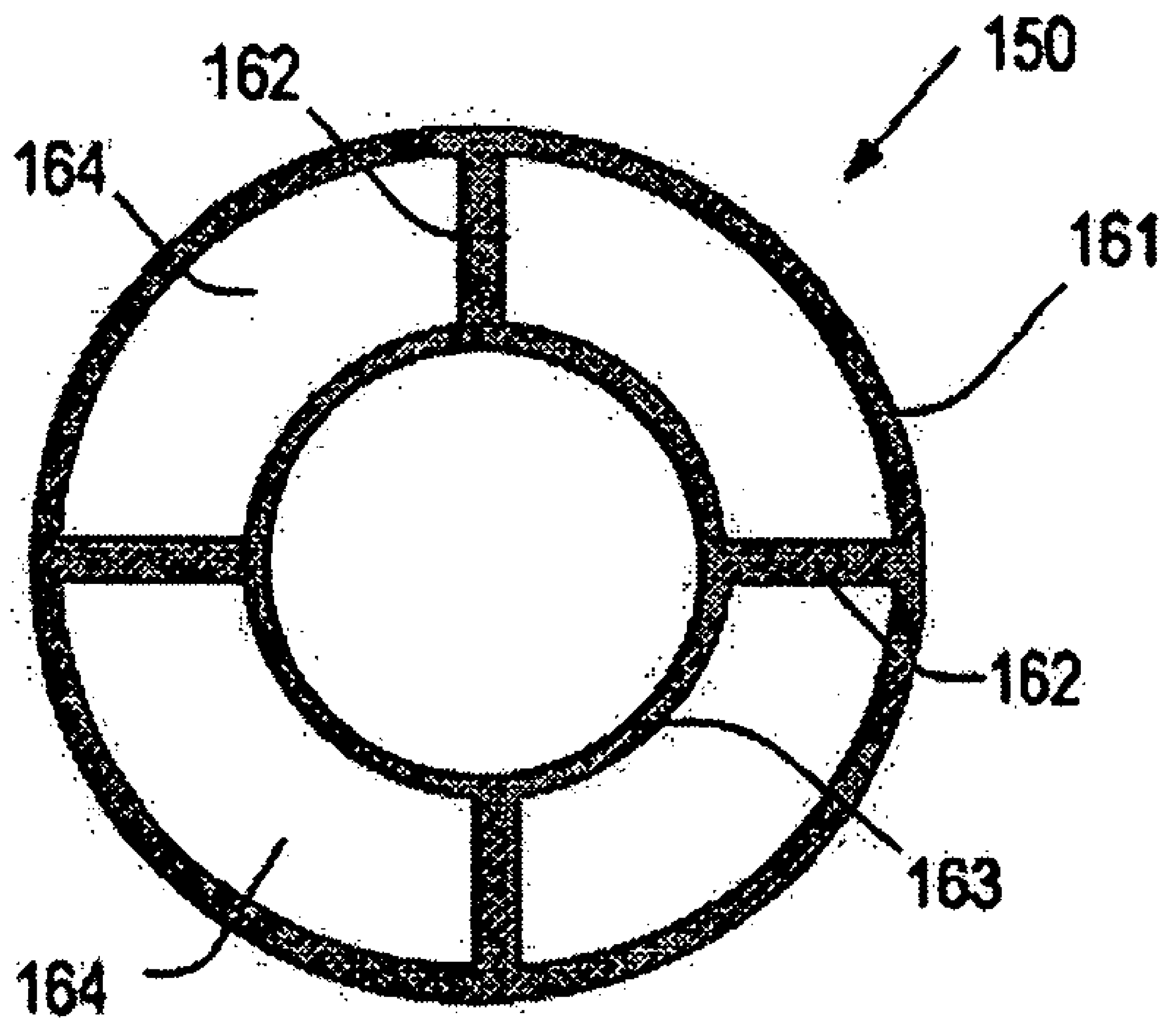

FIG. 8B

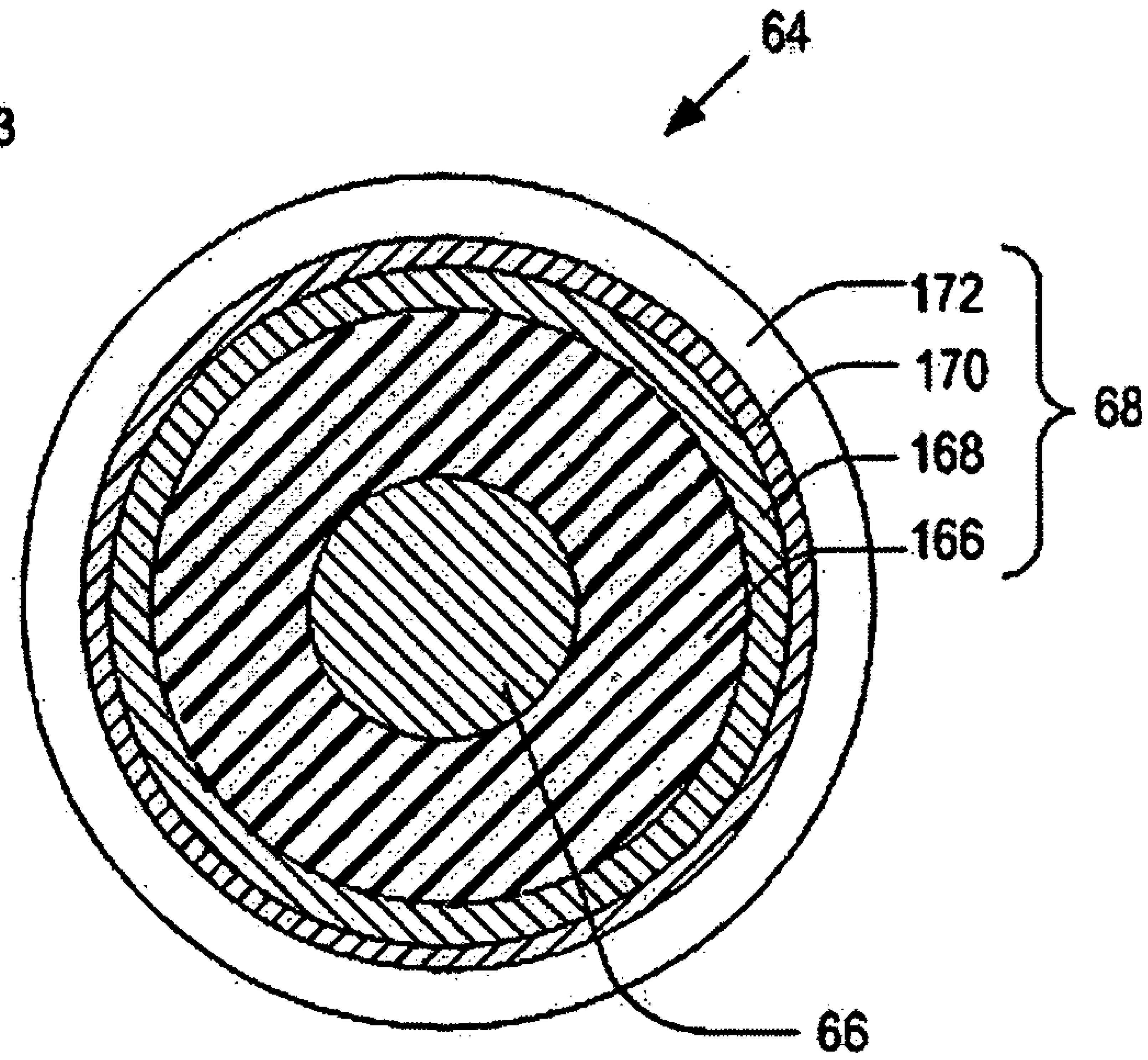

FIG. 9 (PRIOR ART)

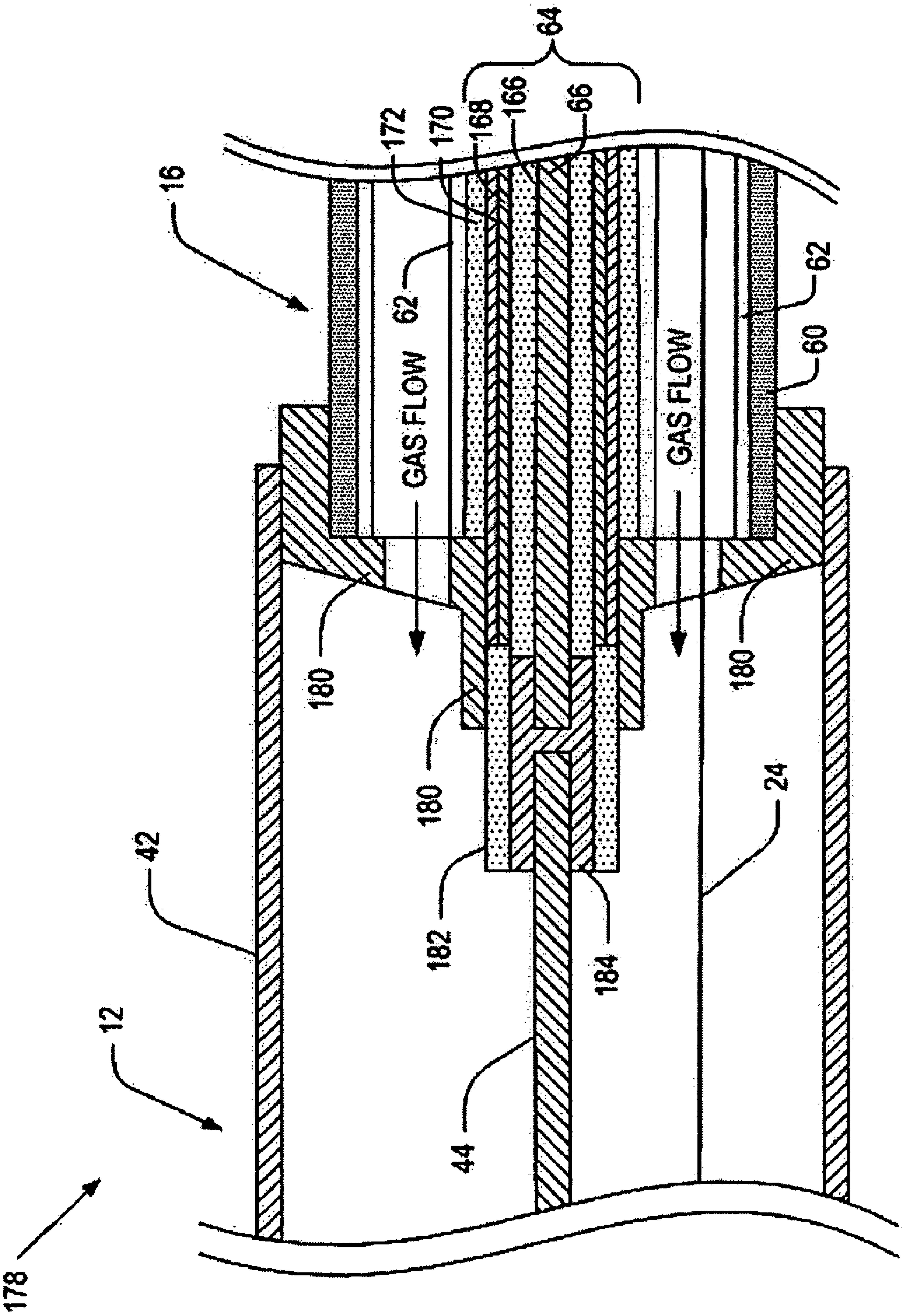
64
172
170
168
166
66
16
62
62
GAS FLOW
GAS FLOW
62
60
180
180
180
180
24
42
182
184
12
44
178

FIG. 10

PORTABLE MICROWAVE PLASMA DISCHARGE UNIT

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to plasma generating systems, and more particularly to a portable microwave plasma discharge unit.

2. Discussion of the Related Art

In recent years, the progress on producing plasma has been increasing. Typically, plasma consists of positive charged ions, neutral species and electrons. In general, plasmas may be subdivided into two categories: thermal equilibrium and thermal non-equilibrium plasmas. Thermal equilibrium implies that the temperature of all species including positive charged ions, neutral species, and electrons, is the same.

Plasmas may also be classified into local thermal equilibrium (LTE) and non-LTE plasmas, where this subdivision is typically related to the pressure of the plasmas. The term "local thermal equilibrium (LTE)" refers to a thermodynamic state where the temperatures of all of the plasma species are the same in the localized areas in the plasma.

A high plasma pressure induces a large number of collisions per unit time interval in the plasma, leading to sufficient energy exchange between the species comprising the plasma, and this leads to an equal temperature for the plasma species. A low plasma pressure, on the other hand, may yield one or more temperatures for the plasma species due to insufficient collisions between the species of the plasma.

In non-LTE, or simply non-thermal plasmas, the temperature of the ions and the neutral species is usually less than 100° C., while the temperature of the electrons can be up to several tens of thousand degrees in Celsius. Therefore, non-LTE plasma may serve as highly reactive tools for powerful and also gentle applications without consuming a large amount of energy. This "hot coolness" allows a variety of processing possibilities and economic opportunities for various applications. Powerful applications include metal deposition systems and plasma cutters, and gentle applications include plasma surface cleaning systems and plasma displays.

One of these applications is plasma sterilization, which uses plasma to destroy microbial life, including highly resistant bacterial endospores. Sterilization is a critical step in ensuring the safety of medical and dental devices, materials, and fabrics for final use. Existing sterilization methods used in hospitals and industries include autoclaving, ethylene oxide gas (EtO), dry heat, and irradiation by gamma rays or electron beams. These technologies have a number of problems that must be dealt with and overcome and these include issues such as thermal sensitivity and destruction by heat, the formation of toxic byproducts, the high cost of operation, and the inefficiencies in the overall cycle duration. Consequently, healthcare agencies and industries have long needed a sterilizing technique that could function near room temperature and with much shorter times without inducing structural damage to a wide range of medical materials including various heat sensitive electronic components and equipment. Thus, there is a need for devices that can generate atmospheric pressure plasma as an effective and low-cost sterilization source, and more particularly, there is a need for portable atmospheric plasma generating devices that can be quickly applied to sterilize infected areas, such as wounds on human body in medical, military or emergency operations.

Several portable plasma systems have been developed by the industries and by national laboratories. An atmospheric plasma system, as described in a technical paper by Schütze et al., entitled "Atmospheric Pressure Plasma Jet: A review and Comparison to Other Plasma Sources," IEEE Transactions on Plasma Science, Vol. 26, No. 6, Dec. 1998, are 13.56 MHz RF based portable plasma systems. ATMOFLO™ Atmospheric Plasma Products, manufactured by Surfx Technologies, Culver City, Calif., are also portable plasma systems based on RF technology. The drawbacks of these conventional Radio Frequency (RF) systems are the component costs and their power efficiency due to an inductive coupling of the RF power. In these systems, low power efficiency requires higher energy to generate plasma and, as a consequence, this requires a cooling system to dissipate wasted energy. Due to this limitation, the RF portable plasma system is somewhat bulky and not suitable for a point-of-use system. Thus, there is the need for portable plasma systems based on a heating mechanism that is more energy efficient than existing RF technologies.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a portable plasma discharge units that use microwave energy as a heating mechanism. Utilizing microwaves as a heating mechanism is a solution to the limitation of the RF portable systems. Since microwave energy has a higher energy density, a more efficient portable plasma source can be generated using less energy than the RF systems. Also, since less energy is required to generate the plasma, the microwave power may be transmitted through a coaxial cable instead of costly and rigid waveguides. Accordingly, the usage of the coaxial cable for transmitting power can provide flexible operations for the plasma discharge unit movements.

According to one aspect of the present invention, a portable microwave plasma discharge unit includes a gas flow tube adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough. The gas flow tube has an inlet portion and an outlet portion. The unit also includes a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in the gas flow tube. The rod-shaped conductor has an end configured to contact a microwave supply conductor and a tapered tip positioned adjacent the outlet portion of the gas flow tube.

According to another aspect of the present invention, a portable microwave plasma discharge unit includes: a gas flow tube adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and having an inlet portion and an outlet portion. The unit also includes a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in the gas flow tube. The rod-shaped conductor having an end configured to receive microwaves and a tapered tip positioned adjacent the outlet portion and configured to focus microwaves traveling through the rod-shaped conductor. The unit also includes at least one centering disk located within the gas flow tube for securing the rod-shaped conductor to the gas flow tube. Also the centering disk has a structure defining at least one through-pass hole. The unit also includes an interface portion including: a gas flow duct having an outlet portion coupled to the inlet portion of the gas flow tube and an inlet portion coupled to a supply line that comprises at least one gas line and a microwave supply conductor; a conductor segment axially disposed within the gas flow duct, the conductor segment being configured to interconnect an end of the rod-shaped conductor with the microwave supply conductor; and a holder located within the gas flow duct for securing the conductor segment to the gas flow duct. The holder has at least one through-pass hole to provide fluid communication between at least one gas line and the gas flow tube.

These and other advantages and features of the invention will become apparent to those persons skilled in the art upon reading the details of the invention as more fully described below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a schematic diagram of a system that has a portable microwave plasma discharge unit in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **2** is a schematic diagram of the microwave supply unit shown in FIG. **1**.

FIG. **3** is a partial cross-sectional view of the portable microwave plasma discharge unit and a supply line shown in FIG. **1**.

FIGS. **4**A–**4**B are cross-sectional views of alternative embodiments of the gas flow tube shown in FIG. **3**.

FIGS. **5**A–**5**E are cross-sectional views of alternative embodiments of the rod-shaped conductor shown in FIG. **3**.

FIGS. **6**A–**6**C are cross-sectional views of the supply line shown in FIG. **3**.

FIG. **7** is a cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of the portable microwave plasma discharge unit shown in FIG. **3**.

FIG. **8**A is a cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of the supply line shown in FIG. **3**.

FIG. **8**B is a schematic diagram of a centering disk viewed in the longitudinal direction of the supply line shown in FIG. **8**A.

FIG. **9** is a cross-sectional view of a typical microwave coaxial cable that may be used in the present invention.

FIG. **10** is a schematic diagram illustrating an interface region where a portable unit is coupled to a supply line in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Unlike existing RF systems, the present invention provides systems that can generate atmospheric plasma using microwave energy. Due to microwave energy's higher energy density, a more efficient portable plasma source can be generated using less energy than the RF systems. Also, due to the lower amount of energy required to generate the plasma, microwave power may be transmitted through a coaxial cable instead of the expensive and rigid waveguides. The usage of the coaxial cable to transmit power can provide flexible operations for the nozzle movements.

Referring to FIG. **1**, FIG. **1** is a schematic diagram of a system **10** that has a portable microwave plasma discharge unit in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. As illustrated, the system **10** comprises: a microwave supply unit **22** for generating microwaves; a waveguide **20** connected to the microwave supply unit **22**; a waveguide-to-coax adapter **18** configured to receive the microwaves within the waveguide **20** and provide the received microwaves through its microwave coaxial connector **17**; a portable microwave plasma discharge unit **12** (also called "portable unit") configured to a discharge plasma **14**; a supply line **16** for supplying a gas flow and microwaves to the portable microwave plasma discharge unit **12**, where the supply line **16** is coupled to a gas tank **21** via a Mass Flow Control (MFC) valve **19** and the waveguide-to-coax adapter **18**; and a conductor having at least two conductor signal lines **24** that interconnects an adjustable power control unit **50** (shown in FIG. **3**) is mounted on the portable unit **12** (shown in FIG. **3**) with a power level control **40** of a power supply **38** (shown in FIG. **2**). The waveguide-to-coax adapter **18** is well known in the art and is preferably, but not limited to, WR284 or WR340 which is used in the system **10**.

FIG. **2** is a schematic diagram of the microwave supply unit **22** shown in FIG. **1**. In one embodiment, the microwave supply unit **22** may comprise: a microwave generator **36** connected to the waveguide **20**; and the power supply **38** for providing power to the microwave generator **36**. The power supply **38** includes the power level control **40** connected to the adjustable power control unit **50** (shown in FIG. **3**) via the conductor having at least two signal lines **24**.

In another embodiment, the microwave supply unit **22** may comprise: the microwave generator **36** connected to the waveguide **20**; the power supply **38** for the microwave generator **36**; an isolator **30** comprising a dummy load **32** configured to dissipate retrogressing microwaves that travel toward a microwave generator **36** and a circulator **34** for directing the retrogressing microwaves to the dummy load **32**; a coupler **28** for coupling the microwaves and connected to a power meter **27** for measuring the microwave fluxes; and a tuner **26** to reduce the amount of the retrogressing microwaves.

The components of the microwave supply unit **22** shown in FIG. **2** are well known to those skilled in the art and are provided for exemplary purposes only. Thus, it should also be apparent to one skilled in the art that a system with a capability to provide microwaves to the waveguide **20** may replace the microwave supply unit **22** without deviating from the present invention.

FIG. **3** is a schematic cross-sectional view of the portable unit **12** and the supply line **16** shown in FIG. **1**. The portable unit **12** comprises: a gas flow tube **42** configured to receive a gas flow from at least one gas line **62** of the supply line **16**; a rod-shaped conductor **44**, axially disposed in the gas flow tube **42**, having a tapered tip **46**; one or more centering disks **48**, each disk having at least one through-pass hole **49**; the adjustable power control unit **50** for operating the power level control **40** of the power supply **38**; the at least two conductor signal lines **24** interconnecting the adjustable power control unit **50** and the power level control **40**; and a holder **52** for securing the rod-shaped conductor **44** to the gas flow tube **42**, where the holder **52** has at least one through-pass hole **54**. The centering disks **48** may be made of any microwave-transparent dielectric material, such as ceramic or high temperature plastic, and have at least one through-pass hole **49**. In one embodiment, the through-pass hole **49** may be configured to generate a helical swirl around the rod-shaped conductor **44** to increase the length and stability of a plasma plume **14**. The holder **52** may be made of any microwave-transparent dielectric material, such as ceramic or high temperature plastic, and may have any geometric shape that has at least one through-pass holes for fluid communication between the gas flow tube **42** and the gas lines **62** of the supply line **16**.

The gas flow tube **42** provides a mechanical support for the overall portable unit **12** and may be made of any conducting and/or dielectric material. As illustrated in FIG. **3**, the gas flow tube **42** may comprise a heating section **56** and an interface section **58**. A user of the portable unit **12** may hold the heating section **56** during operation of the system **10** and, for purposes of safety, the gas flow tube **42** may be grounded. In general, a cross-sectional dimension of the heating section **56** taken along a direction normal to the longitudinal axis of the heating section **56** may be different from that of the interface section **58**. As will be shown later, the cross-sectional dimension of the interface section **58** may be determined by the dimension of the supply line **16**, while the dimension of the heating section **56** may be determined by various operational parameters, such as plasma ignition and stability. As shown in FIG. **3**, the gas flow tube **42** is sealed tightly and coupled to the supply line **16**. Various coupling mechanisms, such as an o-ring between the inner surface of the gas flow tube **42** and outer surface of the supply line **16**, may be used for sealing and providing a secure coupling between the gas flow tube **42** and the supply line **16**.

In FIG. **3**, the heating section **56** is illustrated as a straight tube. However, one skilled in the art can appreciate that the cross-section of the gas flow tube **42** may change along its longitudinal axis.

FIG. **4**A is a cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of a gas flow tube **72** shown in FIG. **3**, where a heating section **74** includes a frusto-conical section **76**. FIG. **4**B is a cross-sectional view of another alternative embodiment of a gas flow tube **78**, where a heating section **80** includes a bell-shaped section **82**.

Referring back to FIG. **3**, the rod-shaped conductor **44** may be made of any conducting material and is configured to receive microwaves from a core conductor **66** of a microwave coaxial cable **64** in the supply line **16**. The core conductor **66** may be shielded by an outer layer **68** that may have multiple sublayers. (Detailed description of the outer layer **68** will be given in FIG. **9**.) As illustrated in the enlarged schematic diagram **53**, a plug-mating connection mechanism may be used to provide a secure connection between the rod-shaped conductor **44** and the core conductor **66**. The end portion of the microwave coaxial cable **64** may be stripped to expose the core conductor **66** at suitable length, and connected to a mating conductor **45** that may be also connected to the rod-shaped conductor **44**. The mating conductor **45** allows the connection between the rod-shaped conductor **44** and core conductor **66** which may have different outer diameters. It should be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that other conventional types of connection mechanisms may be used without deviating from the present invention.

The rod-shaped conductor **44** can be made out of copper, aluminum, platinum, gold, silver and other conducting materials. The term rod-shaped conductor is intended to cover conductors having various cross sections such as a circular, oval, elliptical, or an oblong cross section or combinations thereof. It is preferred that the rod-shaped conductor not have a cross section such that two portions thereof meet to form an angle (or sharp point) as the microwaves will concentrate in this area and decrease the efficiency of the device.

The rod-shaped conductor **44** includes a tip **46** that focuses the received microwaves to generate the plasma **14** using the gas flowing through the gas flow tube **42**. Typically, the microwaves travel along the surface of the rod-shaped conductor **44**, where the depth of skin responsible for the microwave migration is a function of a microwave frequency and a conductor material, and this depth can be less than a millimeter. Thus, a hollow rod-shaped conductor **84** of FIG. **5**A may be considered as an alternative embodiment for the rod-shaped conductor, wherein the hollow rod-shaped conductor **84** has a cavity **85**.

It is well known that some precious metals conduct microwaves better than cheap metals, such as copper. To reduce the unit price of the system without compromising performance of a rod-shaped conductor, the skin layer of the rod-shaped conductor may be made of such precious metals while a cheaper conducting material may be used for the inside core. FIG. **5**B is a cross sectional view of another embodiment of a rod-shaped conductor **86**, wherein the rod-shaped conductor **86** includes a skin layer **90** made of precious metal(s) and a core layer **88** made of a cheaper conducting material.

FIG. **5**C is a cross-sectional view of yet another embodiment of a rod-shaped conductor **92**, wherein the rod-shaped conductor **92** may have a conically-tapered tip **94**. Other variations can also be considered. For example, the conically-tapered tip **94** may be eroded faster by plasma than the other portions of the rod-shaped conductor **92**, and therefore it may need to be replaced on a regular basis.

FIG. **5**D is a cross sectional view of another embodiment of a rod-shaped conductor **96**, wherein a rod-shaped conductor **96** has a blunt-tip **98** instead of a pointed tip to increase the lifetime of the rod-shaped conductor **96**.

FIG. **5**E is a cross sectional view of another embodiment of a rod-shaped conductor **100**, wherein the rod-shaped conductor **100** has a tapered section **104** secured to a cylindrical portion **102** by a suitable fastening mechanism **106** (in this case, the tapered section **104** is screwed into the cylindrical portion **102**) for easy and quick replacement. Also, it is well known that the microwaves are focused at sharp points or corners. Thus, it is important that the surface of a rod-shaped conductor has various smooth curvatures throughout except in the area of the tapered tip where the microwaves are focused and dissipated.

Now, referring back to FIG. **3**, the supply line **16** comprises: an outer jacket **60** coupled and sealed tightly to the interface section **58**; one or more gas lines **62**, connected to the gas tank **21** via the MFC valve **19** (shown in FIG. **1**), for providing the gas flow to the portable unit **12**; a microwave coaxial cable **64** that comprises a core conductor **66** and an outer layer **68**, where one end of the microwave coaxial cable **64** is coupled to the connector **70**. The connector **70** is configured to couple to the counterpart connector **17** of the waveguide-to-coax adapter **18**. The connectors **17** and **70** may be, but are not limited to, BNC, SMA, TMC, N, or UHF type connectors.

FIG. **6**A is a schematic cross-sectional view of the supply line **16** taken along the direction A—A in FIG. **3**. An outer jacket **60** and the gas lines **62** may be made of any flexible material, where the material is preferably, but not limited to, a conventional dielectric material, such as polyethylene or plastic. Since the outer jacket **60** is coupled to the inner surface of the interface section **58**, the interface section **58** may have a similar hexagonal cross-section as the outer jacket **60**. In FIG. **6**A, each gas line **62** is described as a circular tube. However, it should be apparent those skilled in the art that the number and cross-sectional shape of the gas lines **62** can vary without deviating from the present invention. The at least two conductor signal lines **24** (shown in FIG. **3**) may be positioned in a space **67** between the gas lines **62**. The detailed description of the microwave coaxial cable **64** will be given below.

FIG. **6**B is an alternative embodiment of a supply line **108**, having components which are similar to their counterparts in FIG. **6**A. This embodiment comprises: an outer jacket **110**; one or more gas lines **112**; a microwave coaxial cable **114** that includes a core conductor **116** and an outer layer **118**. In this embodiment, the interface section **58** may have a circular cross-section to receive a supply line **108**.

As illustrated in FIGS. **6**A–B, one of the functions of the outer jackets **60** and **110** is positioning the gas lines **62** and

112 with respect to the microwave coaxial cables **64** and **114**, respectively, such that the gas lines and the coaxial cable may form a supply line unit. As a variation, the supply line may include a gas line(s), microwave coaxial cable and an attachment member that encloses a portion of the gas line(s) and the microwave coaxial cable. In such a configuration, the attachment member may function as a positioning mechanism that detachably fastens the gas line(s) to the microwave coaxial cable. It is also possible to position the gas line relative to the microwave coaxial cable by a clip or tape or other type of attachment without using a specific outer jacket.

FIG. **6**C is another embodiment of a supply line **109**. This embodiment comprises: a microwave coaxial cable **115** that includes a core conductor **117** and an outer layer **119**; a molding member **107** having at least one gas passage **113** and enclosing the microwave coaxial cable **115**. In an alternative embodiment, the supply line **109** may also include an outer jacket.

FIG. **7** is a schematic cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of a portable microwave plasma discharge unit **120**. In this embodiment, a portable unit **120** includes two portions; a heating portion **122** and an interface portion **124**, where the interface portion **124** may accommodate the heating portion **122** having various dimensions. The heating portion **122** comprises: a gas flow tube **126** made of conducting and/or dielectric material; a rod-shaped conductor **128** axially disposed in the gas flow tube **126** and configured to receive microwaves and focus the received microwaves at its tip **130** to generate a plasma **132**; a plurality of centering disks **134** having at least one through-pass hole **135**; an adjustable power control unit **136**; and a conductor having at least two conductor signal lines **138** that interconnect the adjustable power control unit **136** and the power level control **40** (shown in FIG. **3**). The interface portion **124** comprises: a gas flow duct **140** made of a conducting and/or dielectric material and is sealingly coupled to the gas flow tube **126**; a conductor segment **142** that interconnects the rod-shaped conductor **128** and the core conductor **66** of the supply line **16**; and a holder **144** configured to secure the conductor segment **142** to the gas flow duct **140** in a fixed position and having at least one through-pass hole **146** for fluid communication between the gas lines **62** and the gas flow tube **126**. A typical plug-mating connection between the rod-shaped conductor **128** and the conductor segment **142** may be used to provide a secure connection. For purposes of operational safety, the gas flow tube **126** and gas flow duct **140** may be grounded.

A plug-mating connection **131** between the rod-shaped conductor **128** and the conductor segment **142** may be used to provide a secure connection. Likewise, a plug-mating connection **133** may be used to provide a secure connection between the conductor segment **142** and the core conductor **66**. It should be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that other types of connections may be used to connect the conductor segment **142** with the rod-shaped conductor **128** and the core conductor **66** without deviating from the present invention.

It is well known that microwaves travel along the surface of a conductor. The depth of skin responsible for microwave migration is a function of microwave frequency and conductor material, and can be less than a millimeter. Thus, the diameters of the rod-shaped conductor **128** and the conductor segment **142** may vary without deviating from the present invention as long as they are large enough to accommodate the microwave migration.

FIG. **8**A is a schematic cross-sectional view of an alternative embodiment of a supply line **148**. As illustrated in FIG. **8**A, the supply line **148** comprises: an outer jacket **152** connected to the gas tank **21** via the MFC **19** (shown in FIG. **1**); a plurality of centering disks **150**; and a microwave coaxial cable **154** that comprises a core conductor **156** and an outer layer **158**; where one end of the microwave coaxial cable **154** is coupled to the connector **160**. The outer layer **158** may have sublayers that are similar to those of the layer **68**. The connector **160** is configured to be coupled to the counterpart connector **17** of the adapter **18**. A plug-mating connection **157** between the rod-shaped conductor **44** and the core conductor **156** may be used to provide a secure connection.

FIG. **8**B is a schematic diagram of the centering disk **150** viewed in the longitudinal direction of the outer jacket **152**. As illustrated in FIG. **8**B, the outer rim **161** and the inner rim **163** are connected by four spokes **162** forming spaces **164**. The outer jacket **152** and the microwave coaxial cable **154** engage an outer perimeter of the outer rim **161** and an inner perimeter of the inner rim **163**, respectively. It should be apparent to those skilled in the art that the number and shape of the spokes **162** can vary without deviating from the present invention.

FIG. **9** is a schematic cross-sectional view of the microwave coaxial cable **64**, which may be a conventional type known in the art. As illustrated in FIG. **9**, the microwave coaxial cable **64** comprises: the core conductor **66** that transmits microwaves and an outer layer **68** that shields the core conductor **66**. The outer layer **68** may comprise: a dielectric layer **166**; a metal tape layer **168** comprising a conducting material which is configured to shield a dielectric layer **166**; a braid layer **170** for providing additional shielding; and an outer jacket layer **172**. In one embodiment, the dielectric layer **166** may be comprised of a cellular dielectric material that has a high dielectric constant. The metal tape layer **168** may be made of any metal, and preferably is aluminum or copper, but is not limited thereto.

FIG. **10** is a schematic diagram illustrating an interface region **178** where a portable unit **12** is coupled to a supply line **16** in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. The supply line **16** may include: a microwave coaxial cable **64** and gas lines **62**, where the microwave coaxial cable **64** may include core conductor **66**; dielectric layer **166**; metal tape layer **168**; braid layer **170** and outer jacket layer **172**. The rod-shaped conductor **44** may be connected to the core conductor **66** by a mating conductor **184**. Grounded cable holder **180** made of a conducting material may connect the gas flow tube **42** with the braid layer **170** so that the gas flow tube **42** is grounded via the braid layer **170**. The mating conductor **184** may be insulated from the grounded cable holder **180** by a dielectric layer **182**. The dielectric layer **182** may be comprised of a dielectric material, preferably polyethylene.

While the present invention has been described with a reference to the specific embodiments thereof, it should be understood, of course, that the foregoing relates to preferred embodiments of the invention and that modifications may be made without departing from the spirit and the scope of the invention as set forth in the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A microwave plasma discharge unit detachably connectable with a supply unit which comprises a microwave coaxial cable for transmitting microwaves, said microwave coaxial cable including a core conductor and a ground conductor, said ground conductor being provided around said core conductor by way of a dielectric layer, the portable microwave plasma discharge unit comprising:

a conducting gas flow tube adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and said gas flow tube having an inlet portion and an outlet portion; and

a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in said gas flow tube, said rod-shaped conductor having a front end and a rear end, the front end being positioned adjacent the outlet portion of said gas flow tube, the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor being configured to contact said core conductor, and the rod-shaped conductor being coaxially provided with the core conductor; and

a grounded cable holder comprising a conducting material, provided around the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor, said grounded cable holder being connected with said gas flow tube and said ground conductor so that said gas flow tube is grounded via the ground conductor.

2. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, further comprising:

at least one centering disk located within said gas flow tube for securing said rod-shaped conductor to said gas flow tube, said at least one centering disk having at least one through-pass hole.

3. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **2**, wherein said at least one centering disk comprises a dielectric material.

4. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **2**, wherein said at least one through-pass hole of said at least one centering disk is configured and disposed for imparting a helical shaped flow direction around said rod-shaped conductor to a gas passing along said at least one through-pass hole to generate a helical flow swirl around said rod-shaped conductor.

5. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, further comprising:

a holder located within said gas flow tube adjacent to said input portion for securing said rod-shaped conductor relative to said gas flow tube, said holder having at least one through-pass hole therein.

6. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **5**, wherein said holder is comprised of a dielectric material.

7. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said gas flow tube comprises at least one of a dielectric material and a conducting material.

8. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said gas flow tube is electrically grounded.

9. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, further comprising:

an adjustable power control unit mounted on said gas flow tube for controlling transmission of the microwaves.

10. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **9**, further comprising:

at least two conductor signal lines interconnecting said adjustable power control unit with a power level control of a microwave supply unit, wherein said microwave supply unit transmits the microwaves via a microwave supply conductor.

11. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein the outlet portion of said gas flow tube has a frusto-conical shape.

12. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein the outlet portion of said gas flow tube has a bell shape.

13. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said rod-shaped conductor includes structure defining a cavity therein.

14. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **13**, wherein another conducting material is disposed in the cavity.

15. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said tapered tip is removable from another portion of said rod-shaped conductor.

16. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said rod-shaped conductor includes a pointed tip.

17. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein said rod-shaped conductor includes a blunt tip.

18. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **1**, wherein the inlet portion of said gas flow tube is coupled to a supply line comprising a microwave supply conductor and at least one gas line capable of providing a flow of gas to said gas flow tube.

19. A device detachably connectable with a supply unit which comprises a microwave coaxial cable for transmitting microwaves, said microwave coaxial cable including a core conductor and a ground conductor provided around the core conductor by way of a dielectric layer, the device comprising:

a gas flow tube made of a conducting material and adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and having an inlet portion and an outlet portion;

a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in said gas flow tube, said rod-shaped conductor having a front end and a rear end, said rear end being configured to receive microwaves and the front end being positioned adjacent the outlet portion and configured to focus microwaves traveling through said rod-shaped conductor;

at least one centering disk located within said gas flow tube for securing said rod-shaped conductor to said gas flow tube, said at least one centering disk having structure defining at least one through-pass hole; and

an interface portion including:

a gas flow duct having an outlet portion coupled to the inlet portion of said gas flow tube and an inlet portion coupled to said supply unit that comprises at least one gas line and said core conductor;

a conductor segment axially disposed within said gas flow duct, said conductor segment being configured to interconnect said rear end of said rod-shaped conductor with said core conductor, and said rod shaped conductor, said conductor segment, and said core conductor being coaxially arranged in a straight line,

a holder located within said gas flow duct for securing said conductor segment to said gas flow duct, said holder having at least one through-pass hole to provide fluid communication between at least one gas line and said gas flow tube and a grounded cable holder being made of a conducting material, provided around a rear end of said gas flow duct, said ground cable holder being connected with said gas flow duct and said ground conductor so that the gas flow tube is grounded via the gas flow duct to the ground conductor.

20. A device as defined in claim **19**, wherein said at least one through-pass hole of said at least one centering disk is configured and disposed for imparting a helical shaped flow direction around said rod-shaped conductor to a gas passing along said at least one through-pass hole.

21. A device as defined in claim **19**, wherein said at least one centering disk comprises a dielectric material.

22. A device as defined in claim 21, wherein the dielectric material is at least one of a ceramic or a high temperature plastic.

23. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein said holder comprises a dielectric material.

24. A device as defined in claim 23, wherein said dielectric material is ceramic or high temperature plastic.

25. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein said gas flow tube comprises at least one of a dielectric material and a conducting material.

26. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein said gas flow duct comprises at least one of a dielectric material and a conducting material.

27. A device as defined in claim 19, further comprising:

an adjustable power control unit operatively connected to said gas flow tube for controlling transmission of the microwaves through said microwave supply conductor.

28. A device as defined in claim 19, further comprising:

at least two conductor signal lines interconnecting said adjustable power control unit with a power level control of a microwave supply unit, wherein said microwave supply unit transmits the microwaves through a microwave supply conductor.

29. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein the outlet portion of said gas flow tube has a frusto-conical shape.

30. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein the outlet portion of said gas flow tube has a bell shape.

31. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein said rod-shaped conductor includes structure defining a cavity therein.

32. A device as defined in claim 31, wherein another conducting material is disposed in the cavity.

33. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein a tip of said rod-shaped conductor is removable from another portion of said rod-shaped conductor.

34. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein a tip of said rod-shaped conductor includes a pointed tip.

35. A device as defined in claim 19, wherein a tip of said rod-shaped conductor includes a blunt tip.

36. A microwave plasma discharge unit, detachably connectable with a supply unit which comprises a microwave coaxial cable for transmitting microwaves, the portable microwave plasma discharge unit comprising:

a gas flow tube made of a conducting material and adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and said gas flow tube having an inlet portion and an outlet portion;

said microwave coaxial cable including a core conductor and a ground conductor, provided around the core conductor by way of a dielectric layer;

a microwave supply conductor configured for supplying microwaves from a microwave supply unit; and

a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in said gas flow tube, said rod-shaped conductor having rear end and a front end positioned adjacent to the outlet portion of said gas flow tube, the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor configured to contact with said core conductor, and the rod-shaped conductor being coaxially provided with the core conductor; and

a grounded cable holder, being made of a conducting material, provided around the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor; and said ground cable holder being connected with said gas flow tube and said ground conductor so that the gas flow tube is grounded via the ground conductor.

37. A device comprising:

a gas flow tube made of a conducting material and adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and having an inlet portion and an outlet portion;

said microwave coaxial cable including a core conductor and a ground conductor provided around the core conductor by way of a dielectric layer;

a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in said gas flow tube, said rod-shaped conductor having rear end configued to receive microwaves and a front end positioned adjacent the outlet portion and configured to focus the microwaves traveling through said rod-shaped conductor; and

a positioning portion capable of arranging said gas flow tube relative to said rod-shaped conductor; and

a grounded cable holder provided around the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor; and said ground cable holder being connected with said gas flow tube and said ground conductor so that the gas flow tube is grounded via the ground conductor.

38. A device as defined in claim 37, further comprising:

at least one centering disk located within said gas flow tube for securing said rod-shaped conductor to said gas flow tube, said at least one centering disk having structure defining at least one through-pass hole.

39. A device as defined in claim 37, further comprising an interface portion that includes a gas flow duct having an outlet portion coupled to the inlet portion of said gas flow tube and an inlet portion coupled to a supply line that comprises at least one gas line and a microwave supply conductor.

40. A device as defined in claim 39, wherein said positioning portion includes a conductor segment axially disposed within said gas flow duct, said conductor segment being configured to interconnect an end of said rod-shaped conductor with said microwave supply conductor.

41. A device as defined in claim 37, wherein said positioning portion includes a holder located within said gas flow duct for securing said conductor segment to said gas flow duct, said holder having at least one through-pass hole allowing fluid communication between at least one gas line and said gas flow tube.

42. A microwave plasma discharge unit, detachably connectable with a microwave supply unit which comprises a microwave coaxial cable for transmitting microwaves, the microwave plasma discharge unit, comprising:

a gas flow tube made of a conducting material and adapted to direct a flow of gas therethrough and said gas flow tube having an inlet portion and an outlet portion;

said microwave coaxial cable configured to supply microwaves from said microwave supply unit; said microwave coaxial cable comprising a braid layer and a core conductor, said braid layer configured to be coupled to said gas flow tube;

a rod-shaped conductor axially disposed in said gas flow tube, said rod-shaped conductor having a rear end configured to couple to said core conductor and a front end positioned adjacent to the outlet portion of said gas flow tube, and the rod-shaped conductor being coaxially provided with the core conductor; and a grounded cable holder provided around the rear end of said rod-shaped conductor; and said ground cable holder being connected with said gas flow tube and said braid layer so that the gas flow tube is grounded via the ground conductor.

43. A microwave plasma discharge unit as defined in claim **42**, further comprising:

a cable holder interposed between said gas flow tube and said microwave coaxial cable and configured to couple said braid layer to said gas flow tube and be insulated from said core conductor and said rod-shaped conductor.

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